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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 9, 2005

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EOEA CONSOLIDATES BLACKSTONE BIKEWAY; DECISION ALSO ALLOWS KEY UXBRIDGE/MILLVILLE SEGMENT TO PROCEED

The Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) today, issued a certificate allowing the Massachusetts Highway Department (MHD) to consolidate significant portions of the proposed 28-mile Blackstone River Bikeway under a single Environmental Impact Report. In addition, the decision grants MHD a waiver for a 3.3-mile section in Uxbridge and Millville.

In granting the waiver – which effectively allows the Uxbridge/Millville segment to apply for construction permits – EOE Secretary Stephen R. Pritchard noted, "Strict compliance with the requirement to complete the EIR prior to initiating construction would result in undue hardship to the proponent because it would unnecessarily delay implementation of a segment of this long-awaited project."

The 28-mile Massachusetts portion of the bikeway would pass through eight communities from Worcester through Millbury, Sutton, Grafton, Northbridge, Uxbridge, Millville, and ending in Blackstone. At that point, the bikeway would connect to a similar bikeway in Rhode Island to create a 48-mile route from Worcester to Providence, RI.

Once finished, Massachusetts portion of the Blackstone Bikeway will be owned and maintained by the towns it passes through and/or the state Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).

The twin bike routes form the centerpiece of the heritage corridor, a congressionally approved recreational area managed by the National Park Service. Separately, by allowing a consolidated EIR for the remaining six segments, EOE removes a significant hurdle that would have slowed completion if the bikeway had been required to submit a separate Environmental Impact Review for each segment.

In giving the go-ahead to consolidate the bulk of the bikeway under a single plan, MEPA noted that extensive information has already been submitted, adding, "Because the footprint of the Bikeway is intended to be minimal, any environmental impact should be modest given the scale of the project. This project is wholly consistent with the Commonwealth's goals of fostering sustainable growth by providing an alternate transportation facility."

State Representative, and house minority whip, George N. Peterson, Jr., in submitting his written support to MEPA [received on 10/31/05] wrote, "I believe that further development of the Blackstone River Bikeway (BRB) will not only help encourage environmental appreciation, responsibility and stewardship, but in turn will have a positive environmental impact far beyond any construction considerations."

The bikeway will also bring substantial health benefits -- even for people who don't use it, the ruling says, because it will serve to promote alternatives to automobile transportation, improving air quality through reduced exhaust emissions.

MEPA's decision, however, does exclude the segment running from Millville Road in Uxbridge to Central Street in Millville, noting that it, "...should not proceed to construction until potential effects to significant historical resources are determined, and consultation is undertaken to develop and implement a plan to avoid, minimize or mitigate any adverse effects."

MEPA also sought clarification on what happens once MHD finishes the work and ownership shifts to the various municipalities and the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). MEPA's ruling specifically requires that strategies and alternatives for the continued upkeep of the bikeway be included in the consolidated Environmental Impact Report. "The development of an operations and maintenance plan for the [bikeway] could facilitate the development of general approaches for all new bikeways in the state, an issue that is anticipated to be addressed in the Statewide Bicycle Network Plan to be undertaken jointly by MHD and DCR."

The bikeway will be constructed as a combination of off-road paths, on-road lanes and on-road paths. The off-road portion will utilize corridors ranging from abandoned rail, active rail, utility corridors, undeveloped terrain and the historic Blackstone Canal towpath.

"Today's decision is welcome news because it helps to hasten the day when DCR can provide the kind of recreational and commuter resource to nearby residents that will broaden the traveling options for many people who live and work in these communities," said DCR Commissioner Stephen Burrington.

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